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ABSTRACT

The three articles in this journal issue focus on the real meaning of competency in reading and writing. The first article, "Minimums and Optimums," argues against the establishment of minimum competency tests and for an increase in instructional time. "Placement Testing: The Objective Irrelevant," the second article, maintains that the standardized tests used for placing students in college composition classes should be abolished and that a system based on a "placement essay" be devised instead. The final article, "Some of My Best Friends Are Interpreters," calls for literary interpreters to adopt a more "personal" tone and to become more self-conscious about the role they perform and about the reasons that they perform it. The journal also contains book reviews and a report on the back-to-basics movement in Kansas. (FL)

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# THE BULLETIN OF THE KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

## Focus: The Real Meaning of Competency in Reading and Writing

Volume 64 February, 1979 Number 2

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# MINIMUMS AND OPTIMUMS

*JOHN C. MAXWELL*
Associate Executive Secretary, NCTE

A week ago, when I finally realized that today was coming, and I had sorted out what it was I wanted to say and had a fair idea of the order of saying it, I cast about for a motif, a mode, or a metaphor on which to hang the washing on my thoughts. I happened to reflect on a fascinated re-listening to a recording of Martin Luther King's memorable sermon: "I Have a Dream." I have no dream to lay before you in these remarks. Rather, I have a nightmare. And worst of all I cannot summon up the eloquence of a Martin Luther King because that voice, that stirring mastery of the English language, and that mystic power which so few men and women possess, which possessed Martin Luther King and was possessed by him, are not mine to share.

Nor is my concern but a fraction of the injustices to which Martin Luther King brought his eloquence and his passion, and for which he ultimately gave his life.

But in musing on Martin Luther King and recognizing that my concern was so small in relation to his, I nonetheless found myself wanting to say how much we need a Martin Luther King in a time when little injustices and major stupidities are loose across this land, cavorting under the name of minimal competency assessments in the many states and school districts. How much we need a voice to say to those in power that it is folly to do what you are doing, it is folly to multiply the manifest and myriad weaknesses of standardized tests and hammer them into a broad sword and cut and maim children and youth and throw them onto the altar of accountability. This madness of minimums must be stopped before it tears us from our proper task, and by stopping it improve our teaching and thereby the lives and—one might hope—the fortunes of those we teach.

Yes, how much we need a Martin Luther King to slay the dragons in our states before the children are consumed and the dragons return to their nests, defeated but unslain, to smoulder a generation or two and then ignite and burn again.

We are gathered today—if you will excuse the figure—in the temple of the North Dakota teacher of the English language arts to whom is given the reponsibility by the people to bring up children wise in the ways of language, skilled in its use, and capable of finding beauty in the corners of life not consumed by the quest for daily bread. Outside this temple, there may be agents of darkness ready to propose the Devil's work—a cheap, shoddy, narrow-minded, short-sighted, incongruous, ill-conceived, malevolent, and essentially stupid venture.

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John C. Maxwell is Associate Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English and Acting Director of English Education in the Department of English at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. He has been a high school teacher and a language arts consultant K-12. Among his publications are *Backgrounds in Language, On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English* (with Anthony Tovatt), and articles in *Elementary English* (now *Language Arts*), *English Journal, NEA Journal,* and *Publishers Weekly*. He also writes the monthly column, "For the Members," published since April 1972 in the NCTE journals. In addition to his publications, Dr. Maxwell's many services to the Council and to his profession have earned him national recognition.

"Minimums and Optimums" was the keynote address at the Annual Meeting of the North Dakota Council of Teachers of English, on April 6, 1978, in Bismarck.

What may face teachers of English and language arts in North Dakota soon is the final flowering of a ten-year-old effort "to reduce to precise behavioral terms what education is all about." It is now ten years since I first heard from a group of behavioral psychologists with whom I worked at a now-defunct regional educational laboratory that, indeed, all human behaviors could be measured and that powerful techniques existed for changing those behaviors if only educators would get their heads on straight and listen to the new messages from the prophets of behaviorism.

To their credit, those brash fellows never did say, as was sometimes charged, that that which cannot be stated in behavioral terms does not exist. They never said that because they assumed everyone knew there was no such thing as the mind, there were no such things as feelings or spirit. No, there were only behaviors, and it was about time educators recognized that fact and got to work.

When I heard that message I fled to the sanity of NCTE and, being then Director of the Commission on the English Curriculum, I called for help from the best persons I could find in the profession and prepared to sound a clarion call. From those efforts came a 1969 resolution at the Washington convention of NCTE cautioning all to beware of behavioral objectives and the hazard they represented to humanistic education, which did and does admit of mind, and feelings, and inner states which, to Skinner and his ilk, do not exist. And from this work came the little book which, with Anthony Tovatt, I edited into something that might usher our profession into awareness of the earth-moving forces beneath our feet.

There was barely enough time to get acquainted with behavioral objectives before the word came down from Washington, through the systems people and the business managers that the name of the game in education was to be called "accountability." Through behavioral statements of our instructional objectives, we would be able to gauge effects of what we do and there would be a great sense of satisfaction among the people, for we would know at long last where we were going, how we were going to get there, and know the most cost-effective means of our travel. *They* had a dream.

But the dream never took root among the people, who knew not the shape of the heaven in prospect. The people were sore afraid—not for themselves, for they were tenured. But they were afraid for the children, for whom this new beneficence had been designed and on whom it had been tested. The people did not think that rats were very much like children, nor did they believe that pigeons possessed the knowledge of heaven, even though they could play ping-pong passing fair. For even the least of the people knew that animals lacked the essential ingredient of mind: language. Lo, the high priests of the laboratory saw no need to think about language very much, so full had their lives been with studying the patterns of animals who needed not language and who would, when properly reinforced, behave as bidden by the priests.

But it didn't seem to matter to the scribes and pharisees in Washington (or Sacramento, or Albany, or Springfield) that the people were afraid for the children. No, everybody was doing it, therefore it must be right to have 24,235 behavioral objectives for the seventh grade. It could only throw light on what we do and have manifold benefit for the shareholders of Xerox and IBM. It was given that the wonders of the American factory system would soon be known to the fusty, informal

and slightly disheveled people in the classrooms of the schools. There would be more bang for a buck. Yes, *they* had a dream, but the people thought it was a nightmare.

The remark that led me to all this ruminating about the last decade—the one where I observed that the present minimum competency movement "is the final step in a completely unsuccessful effort to reduce [education] to precise behavioral terms"—was not of my own making. The statement was in fact taken from the testimony of the National Academy of Education before the National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills early last month in Washington. The National Academy of Education, which comes as close as I can conceive of a national policy board of education, is composed of such persons as Jeanne Chall, of Harvard; Robert Glaser, University of Pittsburgh; John Goodlad, University of California; Ralph Tyler, Science Research Associates; and Robert Thorndike, Teachers College, Columbia University. The National Academy of Education has a regular membership of only 50 persons selected from various disciplinary backgrounds related to education, such as economics, sociology, anthropology of education and so forth. Its purpose is to study education from a broad and diverse perspective and draw on the best information it can in judging trends in education. One trend they decry is the minimal competency assessments now afoot in America.

The Academy is not a group populated by people unfamiliar with or averse to educational measurement. Most of the members are, in fact, extremely knowledgeable about measurement; and it is that knowledge which makes them upset about the minimal competency movement. The March 22 "Report on Education Research," a newsletter, summed up the attitude of the National Academy of Education as a conviction that statewide minimum competency standards for high school graduation are unworkable and will create more problems than they solve. The problem, says the academy, is the tests. To quote them directly:

> The present measurement arts of educational testing are simply not up to the ambiguous expectations reflected in most state legislation . . . The scaffolding of existing test designs is too weak to carry such an emotionally-laden and ambiguous burden. Continuing any extensive efforts and funds in this direction is wasteful and takes attention away from the major task of improving our schools.

At that same meeting in Washington last month, almost all of the 300 selected participants (including NCTE president Marjorie Farmer) cautioned against too much reliance on test scores, hastily conceived testing programs, and more attention to test scores than to teaching. Last month in Montana, a hearing called by the state commissioner of education produced only two or three persons who spoke in favor of a minimal competencies program for that state; the rest of the audience was overwhelmingly against it. As a consequence, it is thought unlikely that Montana will mandate a minimal competency program. Also last month, in Maine, the State Board of Education decided that there should be no minimal competency testing program for that state.

And, not long ago, even the Council on Basic Education—a pretty conservative group by any measure—expressed dismay at the "rush to judgment" expressed in the minimal competency movement.

I don't know whether these events are signs that the competency testing juggernaut is slowing down, but because the movement has found its form in legislation in at

least 31 state, it's "on the books," and while there are many laws on the books that are ignored in practice, those which *are* on the books are likely to be responded to by state department of education officials anxious to "show results" or maybe just have something going on that looks as if they're making the schools accountable. The name of the game is still "accountability."

At the convention of the Conference on English Education in Minneapolis last month, I sat in a seminar with participants from a dozen states and wondered out loud: From whence cometh this juggernaut? What drives it? Who finds sustenance in it? My colleagues were mute; they didn't know, and I don't know. The key must be politics, and that view is supported by the opening sentence in the March 13 issue of *Education U.S.A.* which says, flat out, that the "testing issue is currently in the hands of politicians, not educators." In state after state, eager legislators have introduced and put into motion bills which would mandate competency testing, either statewide or in local districts, to assure that students do not leave the schools unable to "survive" in the society. And you have to ask yourself, how could anyone be opposed to protecting young people from personal and social disaster. It's a very appealing idea, just what the politician in search of votes would rejoice in. An incontestable issue to which her or his name might be attached in the press. And this is an election year too.

So long as standardized tests are used with restraint they are—despite their faults—useful instruments for spotting kids with problems which the school should address. Even if they are gross indicators—as nearly all of them are—they can tell us something useful about our programs and about *groups* of students. But the test-makers themselves will tell you, repeatedly, that the tests are unable to help very much with individual students. They are not diagnostic, they do not tell you what to do with the students. They can only flag probable difficulties in the learning of individuals, and then you have to use other means to see what's wrong. Okay. So far so good.

But when you start to use standardized tests to make dreadfully important decisions, like who shall graduate or not, then the tests are being used for something they are not designed to do. There is far too much room for error to pin a crucial decision on the tests. There are too many variables in a testing situation, there are problems of student attitude toward and experience with tests—all of which can affect the power of a test to say: yes, this student is competent or, no, that student is not competent.

To compound the difficulty, most of the standardized tests which are being and will be used are not even tests of competence. They are tests of *in*competence. Let me explain that. If I were a test maker assigned to create a standardized test of the ability of students to punctuate, I might design an exercise to see if students would supply a question mark at the end of interrogative sentences. Easy thing to do. I design the item and test it out on a handful of kids. *They* are pleased when 90 percent of them get it right. But I, the test maker, am not pleased; for my obligation is to find an item which will discriminate among the kids. So I make the question harder until half of them don't get it right. Then *I* am happy, and so are half the kids. The other half, well . . .

In other words, in my standardized test I haven't developed an item which tells what the kids *can* do, only what half of them can do. Put another way, my objective is

essentially negative. The thousands of important things kids can do are not reported. Why? Because I am not as a test-maker paid to tell those things.

And there are thousands of things that practically all kids *can* do with language that are not reported because success in doing them is thought irrelevant. Only failure—the failure of 50 percent—is important in the lexicon of the test-maker, for only when kids make mistakes can the test-maker discriminate and pigeon-hole them as good, fair, and poor.

A competency test, on the other hand, at least asks the right question: What is it that kids can do that is important to their "survival" as language users. The composer of a minimal competency test can begin with a positive orientation. He or she still has to discriminate but in a way that can reveal success. That is, the test will show what 80 to 90 percent of the students can do, and, by definition the minimal competency test will indentify reasonably well what 10 or 20 percent cannot do. And those students become the target for immediate remedial attention, we hope. That sounds pretty reasonable, but it has a funny effect: Because nearly anybody can pass the minimal competency test (probably including most legislators) the tests look "too easy." It was this effect which upset the State Board of Regents in New York and led them to put development of a minimal competency test on hold for a while.

Percentages are really beside the point anyhow. A minimal competency test ought to gauge performance in those things which modern persons need to be able to do to get along, minimally, in the society. For example, fill out a check properly, read a loan agreement with reasonable comprehension, add, subtract, multiply, and divide, express in writing their dissatisfaction with a manufacturer's product, read a highway map, get the gist of a news story in their daily papers, comprehend an oral reading of their constitutional rights uttered by an arresting officer, and fill out an application blank for employment.

Those, probably, *are* "survival" skills without which the student is probably going to be at some degree of hazard in society. There is no room for percentages. Everyone must have those skills, and therefore there is no margin for error.

One problem is, no one has, by any objective means, determined whether these truly *are* survival skills. No one has gone out to find people who lack those skills and find out whether they are surviving. Maybe they're doing quite nicely, thank you, and haven't needed to read a highway map in years. And maybe they don't read the newspaper because they're too busy making fistfuls of money to put the kids through college. I'm not ridiculing the notion of survival skills, merely asking: What is the base line?

Recently, I've suggested to two researchers that they think seriously about asking local Kiwanis Clubs to take their state's minimal competency test and find out whether these successful businessmen can not only pass the test, but get everything perfect. Should the least-skilled of our children be asked to do better than the least-skilled Kiwanian? Please note that I'm not picking on the Kiwanians; some of my best friends belong to Kiwanis. I'm merely pointing out that competency tests are "armchaired," to use an old phrase. No one has convincingly demonstrated that the tests now developed in various states and agencies have a baseline in reality.

I have particular concerns with minimal competency tests in writing, and I'd like to dwell on this issue for a few moments. If minimal competency testing comes to

North Dakota, as I suspect it will, assessment of writing is one issue that will have to be watched very carefully.

There is an enormous trick being played on the public in connection with competency tests. A relatively unchallenged assumption is being bruted about that *objective* measures of spelling, capitalization, diction and other features tell us all we need to know about student writing. If this pernicious assumption is allowed to go unchallenged, the public will be ill-advised of the abilities of students to express themselves in writing. If North Dakota chooses the current version of the forthcoming Educational Testing Service "basic skills" tests, your students will be asked to identify the misspelled word in a list, decide whether the punctuation in a passage is correct or not, and which sentence of four should be the first sentence in the paragraph. There are other such skills, but these will do to illustrate my point. The test is called "A Writer's Skills." It is, of course, nothing of the sort. At best it can be called "An Editor's Skills," for it doesn't gauge the student's ability to put thoughts to paper. Yet it will be touted that the test measures "writing," which it does not, because the students never write anything. They merely tick a response.

What is happening, of course, is that the test-makers are meeting their first obligation: to conduct an assessment at minimal cost. And everyone knows that the most expensive aspect of assessment is judging what kids actually can do, especially in writing.

Can you imagine the howls of outrage and laughter there would be if a test of *reading* did not require the students to read anything?

It seems to me that if our state ever decides to do a minimal competency assessment—which I hope it doesn't—that this Council will protest to high heaven the absurdity of having writing ability assessed without students' ever having written anything. And don't accept the argument that it's too expensive. By golly, if the legislature says the schools shall do an assessment of writing, then you, Mr. Administrator, have an obligation to do what the legislature has said: Test writing, not editing, skill. You fail in your duty if all you test is ability to edit sentences and an occasional paragraph.

The issue of proper assessment of writing, while important in itself, is also significant as an indicator of a more fundamental problem with minimal competency tests: specifically, their narrowness. Very important survival skills are not gauged, partially because of value systems, partially because of habits, and mostly because of costs. For example, competence in speech—which is far more basic, probably, than competence in writing—is not being assessed in any minimal competency testing program that I know of. Knowledge of the citizen's rights and duties are not being assessed in minimal competency programs, and it is indeed a survival skill to know you have the right to remain silent, to have an attorney, and other fundamental rights. Ability to discern fraud, doublespeak, and obfuscation is not being assessed, and in dealing with the minions of bureaucracy, such a skill is fundamentally important. The aesthetic ability to perceive junk from the market place is not being assessed; and with finite dollars, the poor can have their lives denuded by the pressures of Madison Avenue techniques.

These are only a few of the things which are *not* being assessed. They suggest that there is, in the minimal competency movement, an apparent denial of the importance

of skills by which citizens can protect and defend themselves; and there is a monumental disposition toward being sure that students have the skills which will serve their masters. All the chatter about concern for the survival of young people seems a bit empty when huge parts of important competencies are not being assessed.

And this defect points inevitably to the further charge that, by imposing a narrowly focused assessment, the legislatures are imposing curriculum. Now that, of course, is a prerogative of the legislature; but I wonder if they know what they're doing. For it will follow as night the day, that classrooms will gear themselves to assure that minimal skills are taught and learned. And because huge chunks of the curriculum will be shaved to provide the time, there will be a reduction of development of competency in non-measured realms of the type indicated above. Speech, language analysis, aesthetic judgment, critical thinking, human rights, involvement and commitment—crucial competencies, all—will suffer or disappear.

It is, indeed, a sombre prospect and worthy of your attention and concern. There are days, of course, in all our lives when—like the legislature—we grow impatient with kids and want to put the screws to them, make them shape up and do our bidding. But as parents and teachers, we can soften and redress our punitive moods and move quickly to compensate for our excess. The competency movement however, rides within law and regulation, and its excess may not be redressed for a decade. And there's the harm. And there's our task, to make sense of nonsense, to protect the student from the state.

Affiliates *can* make a difference in what happens in competency testing. The State of Michigan was one of the first to mandate such tests, yet by concerted pressure from groups of teachers, the process was delayed until reasonable agreement was reached between proponents and opponents. The Michigan Council of Teachers of English formed a committee of consultants to the State Department of Education, which has reportedly won very important concessions on objectives to be tested and on testing and scoring methods. In Massachusetts, Florida, California, Virginia, Missouri, Connecticut and presumably other states the NCTE affiliate has appointed such groups or have seen that their leaders are on groups advising on the formation of minimal competency test specifications and procedures. Yes, it can be done, and I'm very proud of those affiliates. They have said, "This is a problem that can markedly affect the teaching of English in this state. It is something on which we have not only a right but an obligation to speak and to affect." These affiliate leaders have accepted their responsibility and a further encumbrance on their lives. They are to be congratulated, and so, too, should the leaders of the North Dakota Council who have anticipated the problem, who have gone to the trouble of rounding up capable people willing to serve, who have had the good fortune to find a leader—Vern Enge of Valley City—to bring the Council into engagement with the forces that may someday bring the competency testing movement to this state.

The anticipation of the competency movement is very important. In Florida, a "functional literacy test" was imposed on all schools of the state without warning. Now, the thing is being re-done a little more effectively, but only after howls from all sides, including a suit from one family. But the mandating was a *fait accompli* before the educational community could do very much about it. Yes, it is good to anticipate.

The first line of action is, in my view, resistance. The arguments against going

into minimal competency testing seem overwhelming. If only because the test instruments are, as the National Academy of Education has pointed out, grossly insufficient for the purposes to which they are being put. This argument, alone, is enough to give responsible legislators pause. An NCTE/SLATE Starter Sheet, prepared by vice-president Alan Purves in 1976, gives further arguments why NCTE resolved last November that minimal competency testing should be delayed until it has been demonstrated that such programs have been proven beneficial to students.

Among the hazards envisioned by Mr. Purves are these:

1. the possibility that scores on competency tests will determine promotion or non-promotion and thus will lead to a return to grade-repeating, a practice which disappeared from American schools after research pointed to its ill-effects on students and schools;
2. the possibility that there will emerge diplomas of different "classes" dependent on the student's scores on a test, with attendant danger of social stigmatism;
3. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to a circumscribing of the curriculum to a point where it will be merely preparing students for the test rather than educating them broadly;
4. the possibility that statements of competence will lead to didactic teaching as a shortcut to improving student performance, when research has indicated that such teaching is not as beneficial as more varied approaches to teaching;
5. the possibility that educational resources will be concentrated upon those students who have trouble attaining the minimum level of competance, and will be diverted from the gifted and the broad range of students who can attain a minimal level fairly easily but need to go beyond it;
6. the possibility that educators and the public will be satisfied with bringing students to a minimal level of competency rather than to a level of mastery that is appropriate to their age, their view of themselves, and their aspirations;
7. the possibility that statements of competence and measures of competency will make schools less responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of this country.

As if these are not enough, there is the issue raised by Merle McClung in February's *Phi Delta Kappan*. McClung is an attorney on the staff of the Center for Law and Education. He warns against the violation of due process requirements if a student near the end of his or her education is suddenly denied a diploma or is given a "substandard" diploma as a consequence of failing a minimal competency test. One of the essentials of due process, as you probably know, is adequate warning and opportunity and means for remediation of weakness. To deny a diploma without warning of deficiency may be illegal.

Furthermore, says McClung, the content of the competency test had better have been taught or, again, the administrators of the test may be liable under due-process requirements. McClung says flat out: "A school or school system that cannot assure the curricular and instructional validity of its competency tests should not use them as a basis for denying promotion or a diploma to any of its students." That, from a lawyer, lays out a tough problem for a legislator or a school board.

How, indeed, can a state impose a competency test unless it can insure curriculum and instructional validity—that is, be able to certify that stuff was taught and taught reasonably well—without running afoul of legal requirements of due process for students. My guess is that the state department of education is in no position to make such a guarantee, and it is misfeasance on the part of the legislature to place such a requirement on the state department of education or even the local districts unless districts are given tests or the means to develop tests which have a one-for-one correspondence with the local curriculum.

Let's assume, however, that North Dakota educators fail to stop the minimal competency juggernaut, and the legislature mandates minimal competency testing. Sound bad? There's something worse.

Imagine the case that the legislature cops out. That is, it does not mandate a *state* competency test but instead merely mandates that local districts apply minimal competency measures. That to a legislature is a very appealing idea. Golly, it preserves the notion of local control, avoids the possibility that the courts will stop the whole thing because of issues of due process, it relieves the state of the cost of the assessment program, it speaks to the apparent virtue of gaining curricular and instructional validity, and it allows each district to set its own minimal competency standards in light of the particularities and values of that community.

These are some of the arguments which have led California, Arizona and a number of other states to leave the assessment to local districts. The legislatures get all the credit for having "called for standards" and it hasn't cost them a nickel.

This seemingly innocuous step multiplies all the hazards of competency testing by the number of local districts in the state. Do you think that local districts will call for the costly business of preparing adequate assessment instruments? Not a chance: they'll just use their California Test results. Do you think they'll use the costly but necessary writing sample? Not a chance. They'll let the "English usage section" of the Metropolitan Achievement Test represent the writing performance test that *should* be given. Will the people of North Dakota know much more than they do now about the general competence of the graduates of the state's high schools? Not really, because the standards set at Minot will differ from those at Bismarck, and they will differ from standards set at Grand Forks, and Fargo. And all of the time and effort spent in minimal competency assessment will have no meaning. The districts will go through the required paces. And if they're short on interest, money, and time, they'll set the standards low and, as a consequence, fail to identify students who *genuinely do need remedial assistance*.

None of us wants to graduate students who are functionally illiterate, who are endangered by their illiteracy, who cannot survive in any meaningful sense of the term. On this score, we cannot disagree with those who propose minimal competency assessments. We should be the last ever to say, it's o.k. for Bill to graduate even if he can't read the sign by the sandpit that says: Danger! No Swimming. Nor do we wish to say: It's o.k. for Anna Louise to graduate without being able to fill out an application form, for she will probably get married, have a family, and never need to fill out an application. With Dylan Thomas, we should rage, rage against the darkness of such things. Our stance on these matters can only be that they are crimes against children. Yes, Mr. Legislator, we agree.

But our aversion to illiteracy does not mean that we agree on the means of assessing it. Why, indeed, all this claptrap of tests? Are not teachers who vork with children and youth all day long, year after year able in a moment to tell you with 99 percent accuracy who the endangered species are? How much better it would be to spend the money to be used on assessment and provide the people and the time to *do* something about that illiteracy.

We don't need competency tests: we need instructional time. We need teachers working one on one with functionally illiterate kids. We need principals relieved of the paper burdens of their lives so they can, as instructional leaders, monitor the progress of students and, early in the game, identify those youngsters whose teachers may not have identified them as functional illiterates.

And while we're on the subject of remediation, let this become an axiom: No bill should pass the legislature that does not provide funds for remediation of functional illiterates, however defined. These are our handicapped, the ones for whom our system of mass-education is ill-designed. They are unfortunate, just as fully as are those now so fully endowed under provisions of Public Law 94-142 and similar legislation in the states. It would be criminal merely to characterize these youngsters as functional illiterates and then do nothing about their needs. To label them as "the dummies" and do nothing to help them escape that stigma would be cruel beyond measure. In a qualitatively similar move, to give them a substandard diploma without providing full means for redress including two or three years' attention to their shortcomings would, again, be cruel and possibly illegal.

It may not be possible to avoid the minimal competency movement in this state. There are many well-meaning people who are convinced that something of this sort is needed, if I may borrow a phrase, "to tighten up the laxity in the schools." Robert L. Ebel in the April *Phi Delta Kappan* argues persuasively if not convincingly that the minmimal competency movement is a necessary countermove for a "specious, unsound, anti-intellectual philosophy of education . . . which has given rise to generations of warm-hearted but soft-headed pedagogy." And even the National Academy of Education, which is opposed to most aspects of the minimal competency movement, nonetheless, declares that "we are doing so little real teaching now, especially to low-SES and minority children, that we can probably show enormous initial improvement by simply attending to the elementary task of doing more teaching and keeping expectations high." The competency movement, so the Academy's argument goes, may highlight the critical need to keep what they call "time on task" at high levels. In other words, spend more time on instruction and less on distractive influences.

I cannot resist the observation that a prime candidate for elimination is the distraction of testing. Mindless, witless, meaingless, misleading testing that steals the only non-renewable resource in the language arts classroom: time.

I congratulate the North Dakota Council for being ahead of the game. The children of North Dakota will the better for your vigilance.

## Placement Testing: The Objective Irrelevant

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As anyone who has spent even a few years teaching freshman composition in a large state-supported university can testify, there are serious flaws in our placement and testing procedures. Some students are forced to take courses they do not really need, while others are exempted from basic courses which teach writing skills they have never seen put into practice. The pressures of over-enrollment and under-budgeting plague all of us; we are thankful for the small favors which exempt some of the students from our otherwise crowded classrooms, yet we must concern ourselves with whether the students are really getting the training they need. Are they being placed into the right courses? Do those who are exempted from the freshman writing requirement really have the necessary skills? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is too often "no."

Before going any further, I must admit to total amateurism. I am a teacher of composition and an administrator in a large writing program, not an expert on testing. The literature on testing is extensive, and I have been able to sample no more than a small portion of it. Often, in fact, it is clearly beyond my level of expertise, and in most instances I am willing to accept the testing experts' pronouncements as accurate and honest. But as a teacher at three different state universities I have often had to face students in my classes who did not belong there; as an administrator at two of those universities I have had to face complaints from other faculty members about students who cannot write acceptable English prose yet are exempted from the basic writing courses. My experience, in other words, is practical—and I think typical as well. The evidence I have seen leads me to conclude that placement in writing courses has created pedagogical problems that are not sufficiently balanced by the economic advantages it offers.

Our problem, I think, is that in search for the "scientific" and "objective," we have accepted a methodology which works well in some disciplines but not in our own. The "tools" and "instruments" of testing for the sciences may work very well in examining the student's skill in geology or plant pathology, or even in mathematics, but they simply will not work for testing writing skills. Granted, we can use modified versions of these tests, just as an amateur craftsman can use a vacuum gauge like a hammer, but do they produce the results we want, or have we simply come to be grudgingly satisfied with the results they produce? We have, I should like to propose, bought the wrong tools for the job, and having made the investment, we either lament our inability to do the job correctly or change the nature of the task to fit the tools. Having set out to build a footstool, we have decided to tune an engine instead.

It is no doubt possible to gauge how well a student understands, say, Book I of *The Faerie Queene* by subjecting him to a controlled 50 minute objective examination. We can even so gauge his grasp of modern critical theory. More to the point, we can use such methods to test the student's ability to spot dangling modifiers and comma splices in the writing of others. But is there really a correlation between recognizing

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and avoiding such problems? The College Entrance Examination Board thinks so. In its announcement of the 1977-78 English Composition Test with Essay, the CEEB says that "the basic assumption of the test is that students who recognize problems in the writing of others are likely not to have those problems in their own essays, an assumption confirmed by careful research" (p. 2). On the other hand, those of us who actually teach such courses have doubts, despite the careful research. While students who write well may indeed "recognize problems in the writing of others," it does not necessarily follow that all students who recognize such problems write well. The latter, of course, is the assumption of the CEEB and other testing organizations. But we need to be careful not to confuse these two separate issues. Furthermore, as Richard Braddock has pointed out, even the ability to avoid such errors is not in itself an indicator of the ability to write well:

> . . . to suggest that tests over such standard forms as tests of writing ability is patently absurd for two reasons. First, such tests sample students' ability to distinguish between standard and nonstandard forms which someone else has written, not their ability to write their own. At best, these tests evaluate proofreading ability, or more charitably but less accurately, editing ability. Second, such tests make no attempt to measure students' ability to accomplish other aspects of writing. No commercially available standardized test attempts to measure a student's ability to select a subject, and an approach and a mode for it appropriate to the writer and the prospective readers . . . At this stage of our understanding of writing and of testing, it is difficult to believe that any standardized test will be constructed which can measure such abilities. Therefore, anyone who professes to evaluate "writing ability" with a standardized test is either telling a falsehood or speaking from ignorance.[1]

Objective testing, that is testing of the multiple choice variety, can tell us virtually nothing about how well a student can write. It tells us only something about how capable he is of spotting particular kinds of errors or, in the case of some tests, how capable he is of second guessing the test makers about which sentences or phrases are more felicitous than others. If we are to expect the student who can answer such questions correctly to write good prose, we may as well expect the student who can pass an objective examination on *The Faerie Queene* to be able to produce a poem like it.

I am afraid, in fact, that I must even disagree with Braddock's evaluation of the best use of such tests:

> Roughly predicting a student's ability to well in a composition course is something else. If large numbers of students are to be tracked according to their proficiency in writing standard English, and if success in the tracks is judged heavily on that basis, then standardized test scores may have predictive value. Students who are misclassified by such tests can be reclassified after their teacher has had a chance to see several examples of their actual writing.
>
> (pp. 119-20)

Even given the conditions Braddock lists, there would still be major problems. If

students who should be exempted are placed *into* a course, then we can later excuse them with little trouble. But what of the students who are wrongly placed *out of* a course, that is, those who are exempted from the requirement? We may never see them again, but we still surely hear about at least a few of them. Unless we can depend upon an exceptionally enlightened faculty (in other departments as well as in our own), then chances are that the student's inability to write will not be noticed until it is too late for us to do anything about it. Perhaps the answer, then, lies not in our post-testing responsibilities, but rather in changing the type of tests we give.

Provided that we concede some sort of relationship between the course and the test, there are two options for the use of placement tests: we may devise a test for what is actually taught, or we may teach what is actually tested. If we follow the latter course, and it all that is tested is a sense of grammatical correctness, then we should teach just that. Few of us will agree, however, that a course in grammar is a sufficient substitute for a writing course. If we believe in what we teach, then we need to change the tests, to have the students actually write something for their placement examinations.

The test makers have seen this necessity; the CEEB in particular has instituted a writing sample as integral to its test. Even in such instances, however, the testing still tells us very little about the students' ability to do the kind of writing most of us teach. Consider the typical testing situation: the student sits in a room with several dozen or several hundred others and is given a precise amount of time to write a "theme" on a specified subject. The test monitors will watch very closely to be sure that no one cheats. There will be, we can rest assured, no plagiarism on such tests. ID cards are checked at the door, faces matched with photographs, if not fingers with fingerprints, and we can be absolutely certain that every student takes the test in his own name. Everyone has the same subject, the same amount of time, even the same type of paper on which to write. In short, the test is as controlled as possible.

This essay is then ranked by a series of readers, the scores are recorded, and the student is later placed in the composition sequence according to the guidelines established by his particular university. Granted, such a test will surely show us more about the student than mere objective questions: it will show us his ability to expound on a subject which he cares little or nothing about in an extremely limited period of time under conditions of duress; the student's ability, in other words, to take a test under very specific, and strange, conditions. No wonder, then, that despite this kind of placement test too many students end up in the wrong courses too often.

The test tells us nothing about the kind of writing we teach, and even the circumstances of the test are quite different from any other writing situation. Where but in a placement test will the student be asked to write about something which he has been given no opportunity to prepare? In a literature course, for example, the student at least knows that he will be tested over the materials he has been assigned to read. He will have some background which he can use in order to organize potential answers while studying for the examination. The framework of the examination will be set by the materials of the course; and the teacher provides a known audience. In the placement examination there is no such opportunity to prepare, no such framework, no such audience. There is no opportunity whatsoever for prewriting, a major part of any composition course. Furthermore, and perhaps more important,

there is little if any opportunity to revise. We nearly all advise our students to write a draft, set it aside for a few days, then come back to it and revise it carefully. A great deal of our time in the composition course is spent going over revising skills. But "controlled" conditions allow us no way to see how well a student can revise his own work.

In accepting such models for testing, we have confused the ability to be spontaneous with the ability to put into practice the laborious chores involved in good writing. We have accepted unquestioningly a model which had led us to believe that accurate testing of writing skills is possible under controlled conditions and that objective data are always reliable interpreters of skills. We have acceded to the will of a majority which praises testing methods not applicable to our discipline.

What then can we do? What would be a better method of testing students for placement in composition courses? The specific answer to this question must vary from school to school, for different types of requirements and courses will naturally require different types of placement procedures. Nonetheless, I would like to propose blasphemy: we need to do away with standardized placement tests and recognize that for our discipline neither objective examinations nor controlled conditions work except for the most limited of circumstances. In the idea world of Utopia U, all students are required to take the freshman composition course, at least for the first few weeks. During those weeks the students write several genuine out-of-class papers and the papers are read by several teachers. (Class size at Utopia is small enough that no teacher is over-burdened by the task.) The students are then shuffled about, those needing remedial work placed accordingly, those of superior ability placed in "accelerated" courses, and so forth. (Note that Utopia does not exempt students, rightly assuming that all students need more work in writing, and being untroubled by the need to provide economic justification for pedagogical necessity.)

Few of us, however, can teach at Utopia, so perhaps a modified version of their scheme is in order. Rather than trying to imitate our colleagues in the sciences and social sciences, we in the English Department need to take on the responsibility of placing students ourselves. During the orientation period that most schools require of freshmen, we could assign to the students a topic, or a series of possible topics, broad enough to require thoughtful narrowing and give them a full week in which it work on that topic and write an essay—the same way they would be required to write an essay in the composition course: by devising a thesis, writing a draft, revising that draft, and polishing that revision. Then the "placement essay" could be read by several of the people actually teaching the course and placement assigned according to their recommendations. Such a system presents problems, of course. It would require the involvement of the entire department, every member reading several papers and making judgments about the quality of the students' writing. The system is not, however, nearly so impossible as it would initially seem. The readers need not devote a great deal of time to each essay; rather, they may follow the recommendations of Charles Cooper's "Holistic Evaluation of Writing," reading each essay quickly and depending upon their informed initial impression. Using holistic evaluation of placement essays, readers can come to good judgments in no more than a few minutes per paper. A longer period of reading might be required for some essays, those with especially complex arguments, for example, but nonetheless, considering that only

ranking—not writing comments and arriving at specific grades—would be necessary, the time commitment for each paper would be quite brief.[2]

Such a system would also require that we simply accept the possibility that some students might cheat; conditions are not controlled, and plagiarism is possible. But the student who is likely to cheat on the placement essay is also likely to cheat in class, and that, I fear, is his problem, not ours; we cannot abandon realistic methods of determining what abilities our students have and what help they need for the sake of laboratory-like controlled conditions which assure us of a vacuous but uncontaminated product.

As long as students are placed according to their performance on tests which measure skills not taught in most composition courses, tests which are more concerned with the conditions of the procedures than with the accuracy of the results, we will be faced with the problems of inaccurate placement, with classes filled by students of abilities varying so greatly that we cannot possibly teach to all of them, with students exempted from our courses who cannot write so much as a complete paragraph on a well considered subject. It is a disservice to our schools and to our society to allow the love of controlled conditions to get in the way of actual teaching. And it is a disservice to our profession as well. We are often told that there is disturbing evidence that our courses do the students no good. Students tested before and after taking composition courses often show no marked improvement on their scores, and those who do not take the course score in the main as well as those who do. The problem, we are told, is with the courses we teach, and no doubt to a great extent it is. But perhaps we should also consider that a large part of the problem might in fact be with the testing.

## NOTES

[1]"Evaluation of Written Tests," in *Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English*, ed. Alfred H. Gromon, et al. (Urbana: NCTE, 1976), p. 119. In their *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (Urbana: NCTE, 1977), Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell agree, noting that "standardized tests measure only editorial skills—choosing the best sentence, recognizing correct usage, punctuation, and capitalization" (p. viii). In the same volume, Richard Lloyd-Jones notes that the limited testing period allowed for the controlled condition essay "does not demonstrate what a serious person might be able to do in occasions which permit time for reconsideration and revision" ("Primary Trait Scoring," p. 44). While Lloyd-Jones opts for allowing a bit of revising time during the testing period (and, of course, not expecting quite so much for the students), I would prefer to see what that "serious person" might really be able to do when given the time.

[2]*Evaluating Writing*, p. 3. Cooper presents in this essay a convincing argument for holistic rating. Descriptions of more complex systems may be found in Lloyd-Jones's "Primary Trait Scoring" (pp. 33-66) and Paul B. Diederich's *Measuring Growth in English* (Urbana: NCTE, 1974), especially Chapter 5, "Personal vs. Staff Grading." Although not expressly concerned with placement essays, the latter book does indicate that holistic grading is an effective classroom process; and if it is indeed effective for students in composition classes, it would certainly also be effective for ranking placement essays.

## Some of My Best Friends Are Interpreters

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I don't agree entirely with Susan Sontag when she calls interpretation in our culture "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling" and "the revenge of the intellect upon art." In fact, some of my best friends are interpreters. And I make my living by committing frequent acts of literary interpretation and aiding and abetting my students to do likewise. There are deadlier things to be done with lives and voices. If for no other reason, I cannot fully agree because Miss Sontag utters her pronouncements in a tone as unpleasant and presumptuous as that of most interpreters. Still, I become increasingly troubled by the blind growth of the industry of literary interpretation and by the unselfconsciousness and lovelessness with which the act is usually performed. I am speaking, of course, of formal acts of interpretation, not the natural and inevitable engagement with meanings which is part of the experience of reading.

I suppose if one focused for long on the number of items in existence of any sort, from pairs of pants to hamburger patties, the sheer quantity would be terrifying. But there is something peculiarly disturbing about the spread of interpretive activity. Sometimes it seems to me as though the entire body of creative work is becoming smothered beneath a blanket of interpretive snow so thick that only the blurred outlines of the original works remain. In my office alone, the critical quarterlies, the learned journals, the anthologies of critical essays, the abstracts of critical essays, my friends' offprints, the casebooks, the books on understanding this and the meaning of that and the shape of this and the approaches to that, the twentieth-century views of this and that, the how-to-analyze books, and the how-to-write-critical-paper books are crowding the poems, plays, and novels off the shelves and crowding them out of my mind. I exaggerate a little but not so much. Think of the thousands upon thousands of anthologies and teachers' manuals and millions upon millions of dittoed sheets with questions like: 1. What is the dominant image in the poem? Is the image consistent throughout? 2. What is the meaning of "but" in line 10? Is this meaning appropriate here? 3. How does the author reconcile the conflict between the individual and his social responsibility? 4. What is the symbolic meaning of each of the six metaphorical actions described in lines 1-8? To what extent can separate meanings be distinguished? 6. In lines 3 and 4 what is the effect of the repetition of "mark"? 7. Which of the plot devices discussed in Chapter ii are most prominent in this story? 8. Comment on the force and significance of the title. How has the use of the omniscient point of view contributed to its significance?

At some moments all this interpretive activity seems reasonable enough. Why not ask such questions? Why not teach students to analyze? At other moments it seems a monstrous growth like the Pentagon or smog and one wants to cry out: "Wait! Please! What are we doing? What are we building and breeding and for what?" But there is no point in merely adding further to the din of anti-intellectualism that already seems such a mixed blessing in the land. For better or worse we are a species of animal

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which seems compelled to abstract, systematize, and interpret, and even delights in doing so; and we will no doubt continue to produce enormous quantities of literary interpretation. I think we can, however, be less complacent about it.

We can try to remember and find ways of acknowledging that, like most other intellectual pursuits, literary interpretation almost always occurs, if not necessarily in ivory towers, at least in relatively cushioned environments. The interpreter is usually insulated from the worst natural, social, political, and economic shocks. Literary criticism of the sort we admire does not flourish during earthquakes or bombings, severe dictatorships, nor in tenements or hovels. The interpreter usually has enough to eat, some space, some peace and quiet, and a typewriter. And some hope and a sense of possible audience. Adams and Andreson, of Hemingway's "The Killers," could not write, as do Brooks and Warren:

> This definition of the theme of the story, even if it appears acceptable, must, of course, be tested against the detailed structure. In evaluating the story as well as in understanding it, the skill with which the theme has been assimilated must be taken into account. For instance, to put a concrete question: does the last paragraph of the story illuminate for the reader certain details which had, at their first appearance, seemed to be merely casual, realistic items? If we take the theme to be the boy's discovery of evil, several such details do find their fulfillment and meaning.

This is as it should be. For it really is better to talk about literature, even in such abstractions, than to be gagged and tied by killers or to lie waiting for them with one's face to the wall. I wish, though, that Brooks and Warren had made some acknowledgement, if only tonal, of their own more privileged position and good fortune.

We might also recognize more fully the extent to which even the most alive and sensitive interpretation is a departure from the actual reading and experiencing of a work. I am not now thinking mainly of the quite obvious differences between the moment to moment movement through a book and the recollection of that movement or of the inevitable reduction of texture that occurs, though these are important, but of the alteration in one's state of mind and sense of self as one becomes an interpreter. It could be said we are more detached or self-possessed but that doesn't sufficiently convey the contraction, the closing of certain pores, the shift in center of gravity that takes place. One is back in one's own mind; one is acting upon the work rather than being acted upon; one is no longer in the same danger. The work may still be troubling or delightful or moving, but it has become less a force and more an object. One has the security of knowing that he is in the role of interpreter; the event is less an immersion than a game. The act of reading can, if course, be facile or flaccid and self-indulgent, and interpretation can be an exciting and rich exploration. But reading, at best, involves the whole being and, if Coleridge is right, can bring one's whole soul into activity, while interpretation, however flexibly defined, is a more limited and safe activity.

Most important, perhaps, we need to be more aware of our motives for interpreting and the conditions under which we learned to do it. I'm still talking, of course, about the formalized act of asking what something means, or rather of answering or telling someone else. Most of us learned literary interpretation in school. There we were first asked of a literary text, "What does it mean?" There we were first ordered to put our explanations in writing. In that context the act became inextricably involved with showing how smart we were. We received no smiles or "A"s for confessing how

puzzled or confused we were, or how little we understood, or for our embarrassed silences. Perhaps as early as first or second grade an ambitious teacher asked us why Dick and Jane threw the ball to Spot, and if we were one of those who early were eager to please or show off, we raised a pudgy little hand and quickly spoke our guess, watching the teacher's face to see if we were right. If we were one of those who could not think why Dick and Jane threw the ball to Spot or thought of a dozen possibilities or sat dumbfounded that anyone would ask such a question, we learned that the teacher was happier with those who seemed to know. If some of us were uneasy about the prissy tone and formal diction of the stories or were noticing that Dick and Jane, unlike ourselves, were magnificently Aryan and white, it is not likely we were encouraged to become articulate about such awarenesses. Later we wrote book reports for grades and answered examination questions for grades and wrote term papers for grades and some of us went on to submit Masters and even Ph.D. theses for the approval of our teachers. Always we were rewarded for being smart and articulate and punished for being confused and silent. No one urged us to show how humbled we were by a work, how much we had yet to learn, or how much we loved. Finally, as teachers or publishing critics we have students and peers and editors to impress and promotions to gain. We may illuminate the work, but we know, deeply know, that the spotlight is also on us.

This doesn't mean that we interpret only for the rewards or that we are interested only in exhibiting ourselves. We are governed also by curiosity, needs to formulate, desires to understand things we love, and by a considerable though not enormous love of truth, especially those truths which we ourselves discover. We do become fascinated by works of literature and by problems in them and express our views in order to share them as well as to argue and excel. Still, the act is deeply shaped by its classroom origins. It would be a different act if we had been trained more the way monks are or psychoanalysts are, or had been taught first to be artists ourselves.

Apart from the contexts which encourage egotism, there is something powerful, even ruthless, about the process of interpretation itself that puts the interpreter in a curious relations to others. I am thinking, in part, of the kind of experience a colleague and I and our wives used to have when the four of us went together to a movie of some complexity. Upon leaving the theater, my colleague and I would almost pant with anxiety to begin to talk, to formulate, to investigate what was puzzling or obscure. Our wives, though not at all inarticulate or nonintellectual, preferred to savor their experience for a while, didn't want to rush into words and would plead with us to delay our talk. We were never able to obey, and now I wonder why it was so much more important to articulate than to be considerate of another's request. As I recall, everything dwindled in importance—the movie itself, the coffee and cigarettes, the women—against the pressure to perform that interpretive act. I remember, too, the fierceness of my exultation one day when just before a seminar meeting I made a discovery about the meaning of an important section of Conrad's *Victory*. You'd have thought I'd saved a life or learned some wisdom about how to live. And as I walked into my seminar bulging with my discovery I was not very eager to hear what my students had learned.

I am thinking also of a relation that is more difficult to define. At best, when he is not the patronizing teacher or the mere showman of his own brilliance, the interpreter

is a mediator between a work and its readers. Now mediation is a fine but also an odd and immunized sort of role in any context and seems especially so in this one. If the reader of the interpretation isn't simply a collector of interpretations he must go back to the work, and a major purpose of the interpretation would seem, therefore, to be one of leading the reader back to the work and providing him with a richer experience. Yet the tone of most interpretation is not very friendly. Much of it sounds as though the interpreter wasn't quite sure what he wanted from his own reader and was even a bit suspicious of him. Here are some reasonably typical final sentences, chosen almost at random, of interpretive essays on Stephen Crane: "As I hope I have shown, he wrote no such plot but quite another, and it is this other plot to which we must attend if we are to interpret this novel aright." "It is this duality of view, like Chaucer's, that is the secret of the unmistakable Crane's art." "Real war gave Crane real experience—and this filled an irksome void in his quest for truth." Perfectly decent passages in decent prose. Nothing offensive about them, nothing alarmingly smug or coy, and perhaps that's all we ought to wish for. Certainly such voices are better than those of ad men or politicians. And yet I don't have much sense that the interpreters are addressing me or care very much about whether I go back to the works they are talking about.

I don't think I object to all impersonal tones (though such are a characteristic disease of the Academy) but it does seem an odd way to share one's experience. I grant that it is not possible for an interpreter to give copies of the work he's writing about to all his readers as gifts, but it ought to feel more like that. Anyone who was ever given a book as a gift by a teacher who cared about that book will know particularly well what I mean. Most interpreters are not, in fact, trying to lead their readers back to the work but rather interpreting *for* their readers. They are not quite giving their experience of the work, which would be a more human and comfortable relation, a kind of sharing. They are mediating, doing something in the middle whose nature and purpose they aren't very clear or happy about.

The oddness of the interpreter's relations becomes even more apparent if one imagines him as addressing authors as well as readers. I'm not thinking only of the expression on Charles Dickens' face as he reads the casebook on *Great Expectations* or on John Donne's as he reads any one of a thousand large and humorless efforts to explicate his smaller poems. I'm thinking of the way the antiseptic interpretive voice would strike the ears of an author even when the voice was talking perceptively about the author's intentions or effects. How would it feel to read of one's own novel:

> It is with such an image that one begins to get the taste of parody, and to detect the implications of the use of the mode of motion pictures as the form by which the novel is structured. The "real life" actress whom Nabokov refers to indicates the sort of movie he wants the reader to have in mind; that is, the mode of the film as a way of perceiving the meaning of the book is used both generally and specifically. The actress is Garbo, and the specific kind of film that comes to mind is the melodramatic tragedy or romantic intrigue. The first suggestion of this possibility occurs in a sentence describing Margot's activity as an usher in the movie house: "She stood in the darkness leaning against the wall and watched Greta Garbo."

And why not Mr. Nabokov or Vladimir Nabokov? That use of the bare surname (of which I have been as guilty as anyone) reminds me of the forms of address used by high school boys, whose greatest terror is open acknowledgement of affection or respect. Well, perhaps such tones are preferable to those which too quickly place an arm around one's shoulder or shake a fist in one's face, but there ought to be alternatives

which are not quite so loveless, especially because such tones and terms do not, I believe, usually reflect the real feelings of the critics. I know, for example, that the person who wrote that a certain novel "constitutes" the author's "attempt to integrate certain experimental features of his earlier novels into a conventional frame, thereby carrying one step further in his use of structure to clarify theme" really admires that novel, responds sensitively to the people in it, and has a much richer sense of it than such abstractions suggest. And I am quite sure that my own deepest response to the books of William Faulkner was warmer than I managed to convey when I was anxiously trying to explicate them in print. At the same time, though, I was, in fact, frequently angry and irritable at the intractability of his work, forgetting completely that it wasn't his fault that I had chosen to be an interpreter.

Enough. To be a formal interpreter is, as I've said, a curious role to play and I guess all I'm really asking for is more self-consciousness about the role and about the reasons one performs it. In place of an army of interpreters with set faces and impersonal voices trampling confidently over the pages of books, can't we have people with a variety of voices talking in a friendly or eager way, or even hesitantly, about some things they've read?

## TO TAKE A WALK

It is time to walk into great offices,
cut telephone wires, burn files,
empty desk drawers into wastebaskets;
time to lock up sky scrapers
and throw away the keys;
time to take one last walk
on concrete streets,
time to quit playing chess with dollars;
time to turn off radio and TV;
time to wiggle toes in real mud;
time to listen to meadow larks
invisible in grass, send up across
empty miles of air
their unexpected song.

Elmer F. Suderman

## FROM A READING DESK

Language Play: An Introduction to Linguistics, Don F. Nilsen and Aikeen Pace Nilsen, Rowley, MA: Newbury House (1978).

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This 249-page paperback should appeal to its intended audience, college or advanced high school students in introductory language courses (teacher preparation programs or general undergraduate requirements), mass communications, freshman composition, sociolinguistics, and general semantics. In this basic text the Nilsens have included such topics as what language is, how it changes, who controls it, repetition and rhyme, metaphor, discourse, meaning, effects of context, and English sounds, spelling, word formation, and sentence formation.

The authors have aimed for a writing style that will to a large extent allow students to understand the book without interpretation by the teacher. They have succeeded in generally keeping matters on an elementary level. (Indeed, they sometimes overdo it, as when in a discussion of metaphor dealing with the nose they tell us (160) that "a nosegay of flowers is based on the function of the nose as an olfactory organ. A *nosegay* is a small bouquet held in the hand; when it is lifted to the nose, it is pleasing.")

The format of *Language Play* will aid student comprehension and enjoyment. The seventeen chapters range from eight to twenty-one pages and contain enough material to keep students' interest up without pushing them so far that they can't read a given chapter in one sitting. Each begins with a statement of three or four central ideas that students should learn about in that chapter. Major headings are bold and well spaced, allowing quick and easy review of the material. Each chapter ends with three types of exercises: "observation-collection," "analysis," and "creativity-production." These exercises encourage students to engage in a variety of stimulating activities, and can be used as the basis for much creative work on the part of the teacher as well.

While the quality of publication is generally acceptable, there are a number of proofing errors that will leave students puzzled, or worse, misinformed. One (?) line is entirely missing from page 164. One page 92 we find "flit/flitd" rather than the intended "flit/flitt." On page 96 "brushed" is mistakenly shown in a column of words in which the past tense ending is pronounced /d/. On page 124, in a discussion of the difficulty of spelling words containing a schwa (/ə/), we find "compete" compared to "competent" rather than to "competent." On page 162 we learn that in Spanish human legs are referred to as "piernes" (the form should be "piernas"). On page 92 we are told that the plural marker s is voiceless if the preceding sound is voiceless (as in "lamps"), but on page 125 we are told that whether we pronounce an /s/ or a /z/depends "on the position of the mouth just before the final s is pronounced."

One of the strong points of *Language Play* is the abundance of examples that the Nilsens have integrated into every chapter. Most of this illustrative material is chosen from the world of advertising, and a good deal of it is both lively and enlightening. In

order to dispel any notion on our part that the language of advertising flaunts the rules of English, is careless, or in otherwise unworthy of our attention, the Nilsens point out that with perhaps millions of dollars at stake in a single advertisement, "it is obvious that the person writing that ad is going to weigh the words just as carefully as does any poet." Advertisers "value the power and the flexibility of the English language just as much as does their literary colleagues . . ." (53).

The language of advertising is important to the Nilsens because it is a significant form of what they refer to as "language play." What is meant by this term is admittedly very broad: "It includes any use of language that is creative and unusual; that has a purpose beyond the mere communication of basic information" (28). Thus exaggeration, lies, poems, songs, riddles, jokes, graffiti, metaphors—these and more are forms of language play. This language play is important, the Nilsens believe, because it constitutes the "definite and clearly observable direction in which English is moving." Various other changes going on in the language are relatively minor and "do not point to a significant difference or a new direction in the development of English" (26).

But since "cultures throughout the world and throughout time have had language play," what allows the claim that "it is this language play which is the new frontier of English" (28)? The Nilsens contend that the mass media, supported through extensive advertising, are responsible for all this. The media involve us "in a language bombardment unequaled in the history of humanity," and "a good percentage of what we hear or read through the mass media is at least partially language play" (29). But it is not merely the amount of language and language play that matters, for "the language is becoming more abstract. References and allusions are more subtle and more sophisticated" (28-9).

This may be so, but even considering the importance of veiled references to sexuality (which the Nilsens comment on), it seems unfortunate that certain less subtle examples were included. Perhaps the crudest is the following, illustrating alliteration: "I'm not the fig plucker, but the fig plucker's son, but I can plug figs till the fig plucker comes" (80).

The Nilsens go to some length to explain the importance of language play and to document the richness and creativity of the language of advertising. From this the main title of their book follows naturally. But what of the subtitle *An Introduction to Linguistics*? Here I must enter a caveat lector, for this book does little to introduce one to the substance of modern linguistics.

It is particularly unfortunate that in several instances the vocabulary of linguistics is introduced, but then used in novel ways. For example, in the chapter on English sentence formation the Nilsens introduce us to transformations and the processes of addition, deletion, substitution, and inversion. The notion of transformations is certainly an important concept—a key concept—in modern linguistics, and one about which a reader can legitimately expect to learn something in a basic text. But the Nilsens illustrate the four processes in ways that have no relationship at all to the linguistic notion:

"Love thy neighbor's wife" is supposed to illustrate addition in that " 's wife" was not in the original statement (185). "Going to the Greyhound races is the second most fun thing to do at night" is supposed to illustrate deletion because people mentally provide the answer to what is in first place (185). "Women's lib is okay—I just

wouldn't want my sister to marry one" is supposed to illustrate substitution because we have to figure out what noun "one" replaces (186). "Old blondes never fade; they just dye away!" is supposed to illustrate inversion, because it is a rewritten form of "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away" (187).

Surely all this is a fancy, and a dangerous one because it paints a distorted picture of the truth to students and to teachers, neither of whom may be in a position to sort out the real from the written.

In sum: *Language Play* is a well-organized, interesting, and enjoyable basic text. The examples of language play add spice to help make the book so readable. But as an introduction to linguistics in any substantive sense, take it with a grain of salt.

SEMANTIC THEORY: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE, by Don L. F. Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen. Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1975.

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This little book is friendlier and more easy-going than its title. The imposing title may, in fact, tend to alienate the book's natural audience: those teachers of English who wish to keep abreast of recent developments in semantics but do not feel ready to confront the major theorists face-to-face. The book is actually a survey—an exploratory and meandering survey, with several side trips and some occasional backtracking—of the current scene in semantics.

Although linguistics has been a particularly vital and fast-developing field for the past three decades, the area of semantics has been neglected until very recently. The Chomskyan revolution has transformed both phonology and syntax, and everyone has heard of it; but for most people "semantics" still refers to the work of S. I. Hayakawa, Susanne K. Langer, and Alfred Korzybski, that is, the practical concern for better communication through heightened awareness of denotations and connotations of the words we use. However, semantics in the 1970's, like other branches of modern linguistics, is concerned not with practical matters but with theory: in the Nilsens' words, "the duty of a linguist is to state explicitly what native speakers know implicitly about their language" (p. 158). Modern semanticists are trying to develop scientifically precise aways of describing what and how words and expressions mean what they mean. The earlier work of the general semanticists, however interesting and consequential it may have been, was based on methods too informal and imprecise to be accepted as scientific by modern linguists. Modern semantics is rigorous rather than informal, and theoretical rather than practical.

An examaple of rigorous precision in modern semantics is the concept of "strict subcategorization rules," which Chomsky incorporated into his grammar model in 1965. To use examples cited by the Nilsens (pp. 39-41), the sentence "A little boy darted the bicycle" is anomalous because the verb *darted* requires a locative complement like *into the room*. The complement *a bicycle* is chosen from the wrong category: it is a noun rather than a locative adverb. The sentence "He moved both furniture into the other room" is anomalous in a milder way; the word *furnitures* is chosen from the correct category, nouns, but from the wrong subcategory, mass nouns rather than count nouns. A sentence like "Hope frightened sincerity" also violates strict sub-

categorization constraints inasmuch as the verb *frightened* requires a concrete noun as subject and an animate noun as object.

The precision of the concept of strict subcategorization rules is seen in the fact that they refer to snytax rather than semantics. If in "Hope frightened sincerity" we replace *hope* with a concrete noun and *sincerity* with an animate noun, we could get "The gallows frightened the amoeba" (my example, not the Nilsens'), which is syntactically well-formed, however absurd. Chomsky's famous example, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," is also syntactically appropriate, but it is semantically anomalous: ideas are not normally described in terms of color; things cannot be colorless and green at the same time; sleeping is too passive an act to be done furiously. (The Nilsens do not explain why *ideas* as subject of *sleep* is not a violation of subcategorization constraints, as is *sincerity* as object of *frightened*; both slots require animate nouns, a subcategory of nouns.)

Once the notion of subcategorization constraints is established, the distinct concept of semantic features can be developed. The Nilsens devote one whole chapter and parts of others to the matter of semantic features. To use a portion of one of the Nilsen's illustrations, the words *annihilate, assassinate, exterminate, kill, murder*, and *martyr* (p. 128) are all verbs with the same grammatical characteristics and with the same general semantic features, that is, they all mean something like "cause to become dead." *Kill* is the most general of the group, having the fewest specific semantic features; the other words have the same general semantic features as *kill*, but each has more specific features as well. Thus *annihilate* refers to the killing of a large number of people, while *exterminate* refers to the killing of a large number of animals or vermin. *Murder* includes the idea of illegality, and *martyr* to some extent indicates the reason for the killing and/or the consequence. Sometimes the semantic features, or the relative prominence of certain semantic features, or a given word will vary. An example is man (p. 136). If we are contrasting it with *boy*, the significant feature is (- Adult), to use one common form of notation. If we are contrasting it with *woman*, the significant feature is (+Male), and if we are contrasting it with *animal* the significant feature is (+Human), but in this last case the feature (+Male) is dropped. As the Nilsens point out, the confusion surrounding this word *man* (a prime target of women's liberation groups) is simply a result of not knowing which semantic feature is intended as the basis for contrast.

These illustrations of subcategorization rules and semantic features are meant to suggest the nature of the material covered by the Nilsens' book, but they cannot suggest its scope. There are ten chapters, among them "Semantic Features," "Semantic Cases or Logical Arguments," "Semantic Categories and the Case Frames of Predicates," "Antonymy," and "Synonymy and Paraphrase." For the most part the presentation is clear and interesting, though there are passages which are less so than others. The explanation of phonemic contrast on page 16 is surely too brief to be understood by anyone who does not already know exactly what a phoneme is. The material on discourse (pp. 47-54) does not really belong in a study presumably limited to semantics (and it is interesting to note in this connection that the manuscript was originally developed for an NCTE workshop on discourse analysis). Parts of Chapter V, on "Semantic Features," is so elementary that it seems intended for students of English as a foreign language; the list of prefixes (pp. 71-73) from *aqua-* (meaning

"water") to *vis-* (meaning "see") is a case in point. Some of the musing in this chapter, such as the suggestions of reasons for the capitalizing of the pronoun *I* in English (pp. 64-65), seems not only idle but uninformed. Perhaps some of the inconsistency of tone and level in the book is due to the fact that there are two authors.

On the whole, the book is a somewhat uneven and rather loosely organized, yet readable and often interesting, survey of the major approaches of modern semantics. The book is rather like a live lecturer than a permanent, finished scholarly book: what it lacks in consistency and organization it to some extent compensates for in its easy-going and plain-spoken manner, its avoidance of the technical vocabulary and systems of notation that make so many works in modern linguistics so forbidding. The Nilsens are friendly teachers who try to provide an easy introduction and occasional thoughtful comentary, but do not try to dazzle their audience or to say the final word on their subject.

## FROM THE STATE SPECIALIST'S DESK

*MEL RIGGS*
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In the past few months Kansas language arts teachers have sent more questions to this desk about the back to basics movement than about any other topic. They have asked, "What is the federal government doing? What is the state doing? What are Kansas schools doing? What should I do in my school?"

These questions are asked about school skills, life skills, survival skills, competency-based education, competency-based testing, basic skills, essential skills, and minimum skills. The inquiries show some confusion about these labels.

A school skill refers to a skill necessary for success in completing school assignments. Life skills and survival skills refer to skills necessary in the world outside of school. Most would say writing a research paper is a school skill and reading a lease is a life skill.

It is difficult to write a definition that includes the variety of competency-based education programs. Any time an instructor establishes competencies, teaches to those, and measures success in reaching them, he has practiced competency-based education. Competency-based testing is a part of competency-based education. It refers to a testing program only, with no attempt to describe a program to instruction. The tests are often criterion referenced. Results from these tests try to show what competencies a student does or does not have, rather than compare a student's performance to that of other students, as norm-referenced tests do.

Basic, essential, and minimum skills are being used synonymously, and may refer to school or to life skills. There is much disagreement about what particular skills are basic, essential, or minimal. Most teacher inquiries were about basic skills.

In the new Elementary Secondary Education Act, the federal government concerns itself with basic skills in reading, mathematics, and written and oral communication. The act will attempt to assist local education agencies in coordinating existing basic skills programs and in writing programs of their own. Regulations for the basic skills portions of the ESEA have been written in the office of Right to Read, and will be discussed in public hearings across the country. There are still some questions about funding. Effects of the act will probably not be felt before late 1979.

The Kansas Legislature has created a pilot competency-based testing program, not a permanent program. This spring a sampling of 5,000 students from volunteer schools in grades 2, 4, 6, 8, 11 will be tested in reading and mathematics. The test will be examined carefully and possibly refined. The test will be given in 1980 to all Kansas students in accredited schools in grades 2, 4, 6, 8, 11. Objectives for the test were established by the CBE Statewide Assessment Steering Committee, a committee of educators, parents, and specialists. The test will be criterion referenced, and will be assembled by a testing contractor. Test results will be reported to the Legislature, the Governor, and the State Board of Education.

Of the Kansas school districts that have reported, some believe that existing programs are teaching basic skills very well and think new programs are unnecessary. More are waiting to see if the Legislature will mandate a specific type of program. Some have programs in planning stages, and a few have programs under way. These show a variety of approaches and are probably too new for fair evaluation.

Kansas language arts teachers who are wondering what to do should proceed with caution. Basic skills is a political, economic, social, perhaps even moral issue. Some see it as accountability come back from another direction. Before designing a language arts basic skills program, instructors will want to answer some questions for themselves.

What areas of language arts will be included in a basic skills program? Reading? Writing? Listening? Speaking? Viewing? Others? Should students be tested in basic skills in all areas that are included?

Does the language arts staff agree on whether or not spelling, vocabulary, and grammar are means rather than ends?

What are really basic, minimum, or essential skills? When the chosen skills are measured, what will be the cut-off point? Is confidence in tests used great enough to allow a basic skills test to determine promotion or graduation?

Are the skills that will be tested being taught?

Are there plans for remediation for students identified as needing help?

Is there a danger that basic skills may become the curriculum, emphasizing minimums over maximums? Will there be room left for innovation and creativity from teachers and from students?

Will students be evaluated often enough to allow them to make up deficiencies? Will they be evaluated so often that valuable instruction time is lost to tests?

Will tests be appropriate? If writing is in the testing program will the student be asked to write? Will he be given an opportunity to revise and edit and use a dictionary? Will he be allowed a topic on which he has information and in which he is interested? If his writing for the evaluation is poor, will samples of his best writing from the past be considered? If speaking skills are measured will the evaluation require speaking? Will it be a formal evaluation or will teacher observation be sufficient to measure basic skills?

It is generally agreed that work with literature and the humanities helps a student determine values and expand his world, fill in his map of the territory. Should literature and the humanities be included in a basic skills program? If they are not included will they get sufficient emphasis in the curriculum? If they are included how should competency be evaluated?

By what means will the community be kept informed and made a part of a basic skills program?

Will benefits from a new program be enough greater than those from the current program to warrant the additional time and money involved?

This is not intended to be a compete list of questions that should be answered before setting out on a language arts basic skills program, but perhaps it will suggest the necessity of reflection and careful thinking.